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ABSTRACT

This study examined issues concerned with the participation of students with disabilities or with Limited English Proficiency (LEP) in Minnesota's Profile of Learning, a taxonomy of learning expectations covering 13 different curricular areas across four different developmental levels (grades 3, 5, 8, and graduation level). Representatives (teachers and administrators) from 24 pilot sites across Minnesota participated in focus groups and 22 participants responded to a survey concerning participation of these students in the classroom performance tasks developed to evaluate these standards. Analysis of responses indicated: (1) nine reported having introduced the Profile of Learning to students with disabilities or LEP students; (2) many respondents indicated a need for accommodations or modifications such as making tasks easier, modifying the scoring system, and allowing extended time; (3) nine respondents thought accommodated packages should be scored differently; and (4) five respondents felt guidelines about student participation were needed. Focus group participants identified incentives and disincentives for including these students. They also felt the Profile would have a positive impact on the curriculum, but were concerned about limited resources for implementation. (DB)

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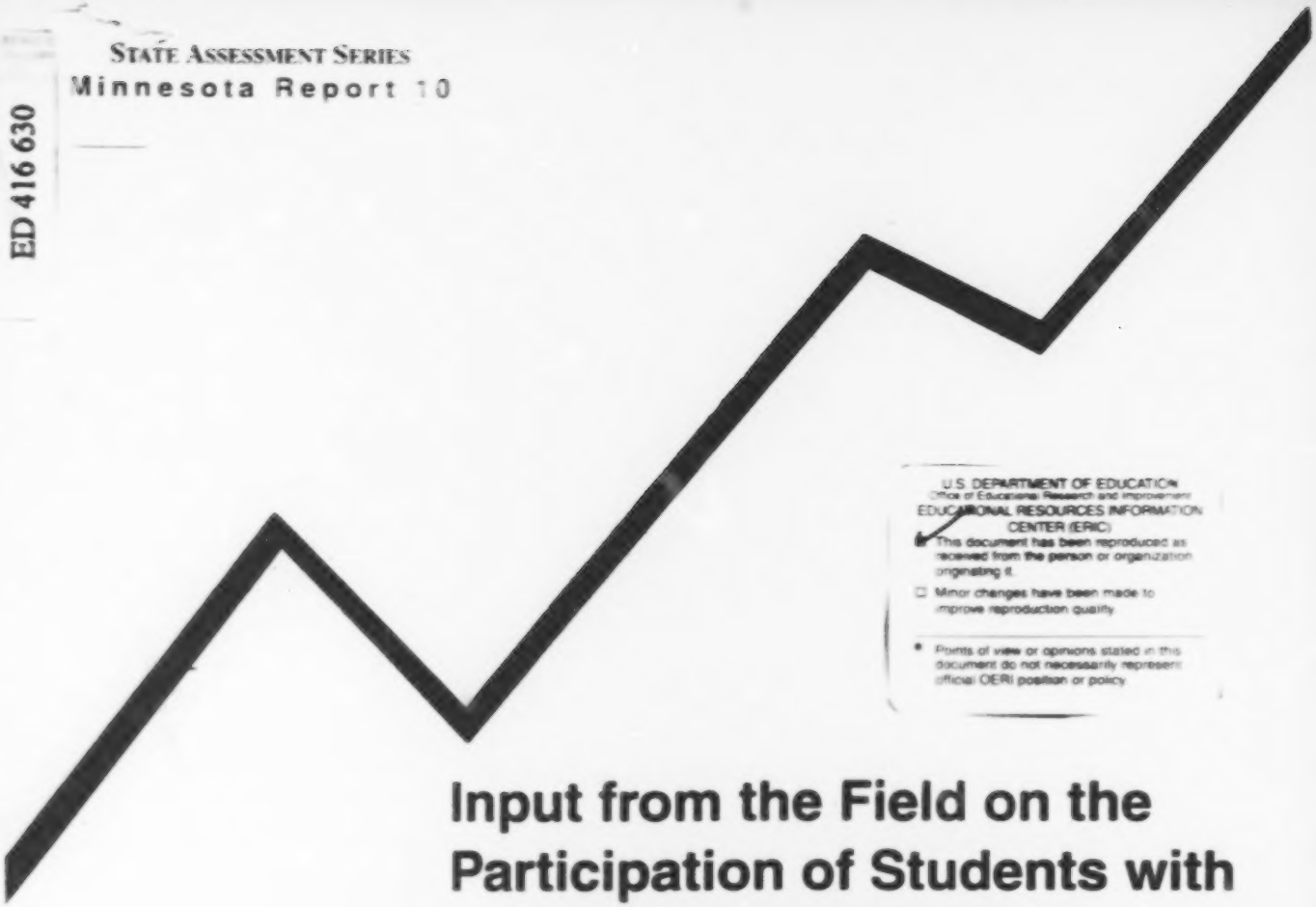
State Assessment Series
Minnesota Report 10



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Input from the Field on the Participation of Students with Limited English Proficiency and Students with Disabilities in Meeting the High Standards of Minnesota's Profile of Learning

EC 306181

Minnesota Children
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STATE ASSESSMENT SERIES
Minnesota Report 10

Input from the Field on the Participation of Students with Limited English Proficiency and Students with Disabilities in Meeting the High Standards of Minnesota's Profile of Learning

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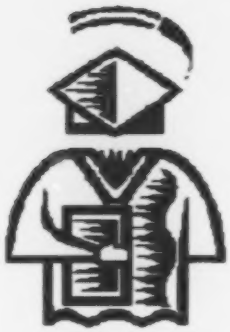

The Minnesota Assessment Project is a four-year, federally funded effort awarded to the Minnesota Department of Children, Families and Learning from the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement. The project's goal is to promote and evaluate the participation of students with limited English proficiency and students with disabilities in Minnesota's Graduation Standards. Specifically, the project will examine ways in which students with limited English and students with disabilities can participate in the Basic Standards Exams of reading, mathematics and written composition and in the performance-based assessments of the high standards in the Profile of Learning.

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Overview

The Minnesota Department of Children, Families and Learning (CFL), in an attempt to establish higher standards for the state's system of elementary and secondary education, developed the Profile of Learning, a taxonomy of learner expectations covering thirteen different curricular areas across four different developmental levels (grades 3, 5, 8, and graduation level). Specific standards outlined within the Profile provide students an opportunity to exhibit outstanding achievement in ten specific areas of learning (see Table 1). Along with Basic Standards Tests in reading comprehension, mathematics, and written composition, these high standards are part of Minnesota's new initiative to improve student outcomes and to create more accountability within its system of K-12 education.

Table 1. Areas of Learning within Minnesota's Profile of Learning

1. Read, view, and listen to complex information in the English language.
2. Write and speak effectively in the English language.
3. Use and interpret the arts.
4. Solve problems by applying mathematics.
5. Conduct research and communicate findings.
6. Understand and apply scientific concepts.
7. Understand interactions between people and cultures.
8. Use information to make decisions.
9. Manage resources for a household, community, or government.
10. Communicate in another language.

A crucial step in the development of the Profile of Learning included the construction of performance-based, classroom-level assessments. These assessments, termed "performance packages," are designed to engage students in a variety of classroom activities aligned with the learner outcomes articulated in each of the Profile's 118 standards. These assessment instruments have been

developed over the past several years through the involvement of 24 district pilot sites located throughout Minnesota.

Recently, questions have begun to emerge about the participation of students with disabilities and students with limited English proficiency (LEP) in the Profile of Learning and its performance-based assessment packages. How can all students, including students with disabilities and LEP students, participate in the Profile of Learning? What types of accommodations should be made to allow for their participation? What will be the impact of such accommodations on scoring and reporting their performance? What are the incentives and disincentives for these students to participate? What impact will their participation have on our expectations and their achievement?

Method

In order to gain more insight from districts about the participation of LEP students and students with disabilities in the Profile of Learning, the Department of CFL invited representatives from the district pilot sites to participate in focus groups aimed at eliciting discussion and feedback on several important issues. These focus groups were conducted as part of a larger training event held for pilot site representatives in June 1996. The respondents included teachers and administrators from the 24 pilot sites (see Table 2) and represented a mix of urban, suburban, and rural districts from across Minnesota. Discussions were led by Department of CFL personnel, University of Minnesota personnel, and staff from the Minnesota Center for Student Performance, a CFL-funded Center that has collaborated with the Department in developing the Profile's performance assessments.

Table 2. Participants in Profile of Learning Focus Groups

Annandale Public Schools	MN Center for Student Performance
Anoka-Hennepin Schools	MN River Valley Ed District
Brainerd Public Schools	Moorhead Public Schools
Caledonia Public Schools	Morris Public Schools
Dover-Eyota Public Schools	Richfield Public Schools
Duluth Public Schools	Robbinsdale Area Schools
Elk River Public Schools	Rosemount/Apple Valley/Eagan
Freshwater Education District	St. Cloud Community Schools
Lake of the Woods Schools	St. Paul Public Schools
Mahnomen Public Schools	St. Peter Public Schools
Minneapolis Public Schools	Wadena-Deer Creek Schools
MN Center for Arts Education	Willmar Public Schools

In addition to the discussion, respondents were asked to complete a nine-question survey pertaining to the participation of LEP students and students with disabilities in the Profile of Learning. The survey consisted of the following nine open-ended questions:

1. Have you introduced performance tasks or packages to special education students or LEP students? If yes, what have you learned?

2. What accommodations do you think we will need to provide to these students in order for them to successfully participate in the performance packages?

3. How can performance packages be modified to meet the requirements of special education students and LEP students?

4. Should performance packages with accommodations or modifications be scored differently? How should results be reported if packages are given under different conditions?

5. What kind of guidelines are teachers, parents, and student support teams going to need in order to determine how special education students and LEP students will participate in meeting high standards?

6. What incentives and disincentives are in place that will either promote or discourage the involvement of special education students and LEP students in these performance packages?

7. What impact will the performance packages have on the curriculum being offered to special education students and LEP students?

8. What impact will the performance packages have on the resources needed to help special education students and LEP students meet the Graduation Standards?

9. How do you think parents will react to a policy that requires special education students and LEP students to participate in performance packages?

The surveys were distributed at the focus group meetings, returned to the Department of CFL, and forwarded to the University of Minnesota for analysis.

Results

Twenty-two surveys were returned by participants in the June 1996 focus groups. Along with those surveys, verbal feedback from one focus group facilitated by University of Minnesota staff is also reflected in this report. It should be noted that not all survey respondents answered all nine questions. Two respondents answered in a narrative form and addressed their general concerns in a few short paragraphs.

Participation in Profile of Learning Assessments

Nine out of twenty-two district respondents reported having introduced the Profile of Learning to students with disabilities or LEP students. Of those nine respondents, concerns ranged from difficulty implementing the performance

packages to the inability of special needs students to complete the tasks. To quote one respondent: "As is, special needs students don't do well on the performance packages." However, none of the respondents thought that students with disabilities or LEP students were incapable of engaging in the Profile's performance assessments.

The perspective of most participants... was that when parents and educators had high expectations, students would reach a higher level of performance.

Verbal feedback from other focus group participants suggested that students with disabilities "rose to the occasion" when completing the performance packages. Several respondents indicated that students with disabilities and LEP students "felt included" by participating in the Profile of Learning. One group participant shared an experience in which a mother of two children (one with a disability and one without) asked what the district was going to do for her child with a disability. The perspective of most participants in this focus group was that when parents and educators had high expectations, students would reach a higher level of performance.

There was concern throughout the surveys, especially from staff in alternative schools, that "at risk" students were being overlooked in this assessment process and may well need supports and accommodations similar to students with disabilities or LEP students. These include students in alternative schools and students who do not qualify for special education or LEP services, yet are still at risk for school failure. Respondents who work with such "at risk" students were concerned about permitting accommodations in the performance packages for their students. In particular, they questioned whether accommodations made during classroom instruction for these students could also be included in the performance packages. These educators requested assessment packages that were geared toward their students, yet were as challenging and meaningful as the packages designed for general education students. As one respondent replied, "Our system is based on flexibility, and my concern is that we will lose our ability to accommodate and adapt to our students' needs."

Accommodations and Modifications in Profile Assessment Packages

Respondents requested that accommodations be made available for the Profile of Learning, and suggested that more instructional practice on requisite study

"Performance packages need to be designed to be as challenging and meaningful as those in mainstream classrooms — but practical for their students."

skills is needed for students with disabilities and LEP students. One respondent noted that teachers had difficulty with the packages and needed more assistance, equipment, time, and guidance for implementing Profile assessments. An alternative school representative added: "Performance packages need to be designed to be as challenging and meaningful as those in mainstream classrooms — but practical for their students."

Many districts indicated that the Profile of Learning may need to be accommodated or revised to better meet the needs of students with disabilities and LEP students. Suggestions included making the tasks easier, reducing the number of tasks needed to complete the standards, breaking down tasks into smaller segments, and modifying the scoring system. Other specific accommodations mentioned by respondents were: extended time, reading aloud, writing for the student, practicing tasks from the packages, and providing the students with information about what is expected to complete the performance packages. One respondent indicated that "scaling down" tasks or modifying their difficulty should occur before offering extended time to students, since special needs students become frustrated from always feeling behind. Concerns were also raised about how modified assessment packages would be looked upon by regional review panels assigned to approve locally-developed assessments.

In terms of decision making, the overwhelming response was that the IEP team should decide what accommodations be made for individual students with disabilities. One district suggested that students have input about appropriate accommodations. There were no recommendations as to who should make these decisions for LEP students.

Scoring the Performance of Accommodated Profile Assessments

The issue of scoring accommodated performance packages appeared to be controversial. Nine out of twenty-two respondents thought the accommodated packages should be scored differently, while six others thought they should not be. Several respondents advocated for labeling the assessment packages as "LEP" or "special needs," or for recording the accommodations used on the student's transcript or IEP. Respondents at the University-facilitated focus

group suggested a different scoring rubric be developed for LEP students and students with disabilities. One respondent suggested that notation be made on the student record if the student did not complete the same amount of work as a student without disabilities.

The issue of scoring accommodated performance packages appeared to be controversial.

The respondents suggested that the IEP process could provide a forum for teachers and parents to devise a modified scoring system and to document student outcomes. The majority of respondents advocated for documenting a modified scoring system or assessment package. Those not supporting this position suggested that reporting these different conditions would further identify the student's limitations; if the standard is met, nothing needs to be noted. The respondents thought that the issue of recording the use of accommodations on student records or transcripts was one that would need resolution.

(Note: *While the survey delineated the terms "accommodation" and "modification" in recognition of Department of CFL definitions, respondents did not follow a consistent pattern when describing one or the other. For example, several respondents listed as "accommodations" such things as rewriting the standards or requiring a different standard for students with disabilities or LEP students. Often the respondents combined any change in the Profile or its performance packages into one category. As a result, the above discussion has used the term "accommodation" to refer to any suggested change to the Profile or its assessments.)*

Guidelines for Participation in the Profile of Learning

Question Five on the survey asked the respondents about guidelines that would be helpful in determining how students would participate in the Profile of Learning and performance packages. Five respondents asked for specific guidelines about participation. Four respondents suggested that guidelines for students with disabilities and LEP students be accommodated to meet the abilities of the individual student; one of these respondents questioned the validity of the guidelines if they were not modified for each student. The other respondent who requested guidelines asked for the anticipated levels of achievement being required for LEP students and students with disabilities.

Two respondents suggested providing examples of student work that would satisfy any particular standard.

Rather than indicate what guidelines would be helpful, most respondents explained the process that their district was going through to create guidelines. Most districts responded that IEP teams, parents, teachers, and students would be responsible for establishing guidelines for determining how students with disabilities and LEP students should participate in the Profile of Learning. It is believed that many districts do not have guidelines, and are early into the process of discovering what it entails to better serve students with disabilities and LEP students in the Profile of Learning.

Incentives and Disincentives for Participation in Profile of Learning

Focus group participants identified a number of incentives and disincentives that may promote or discourage the involvement of students with disabilities and LEP students in the Profile of Learning's performance packages. In terms of incentives, respondents thought that if diplomas become contingent on meeting a certain number of Profile standards, participation in the Profile of Learning could: (1) promote mainstreaming, (2) provide greater opportunities for academic success, (3) promote better performance, and (4) ensure graduation requirements are met. This latter incentive was an area of concern for some focus group participants, who argued that the Profile of Learning was developed as an approach to raise standards and impact curriculum reform, and not to withhold diplomas. These respondents viewed the performance packages as indicators of what a child can do, not as graduation criteria.

Suggested disincentives to participation included:

- The possibility that the standards will not be seen as realistic for students with disabilities and LEP students.
- Increasing situations for students to experience failure.
- Limited resources to include all students with special needs.
- Difficulty in providing adequate testing situations.

The Impact of Participation

The district representatives who participated in the focus groups and survey were concerned about the Profile and its strain on resources. Several respondents indicated there will be greater demand for money, staff, and literature once the performance packages are implemented. In particular, many districts were concerned about the availability of staff and the need for reduced case loads in order to help students meet the standards. One respondent replied, "Hopefully, it will lead to more people being hired in a district to help with standards." Only one respondent suggested that the resources were already in place to implement the standards and that resources would most likely not be affected.

The majority of the districts thought that parent reaction would be positive toward their child participating in the Profile's performance packages.

Districts also had mixed feelings about how parents will react to a policy that requires students with disabilities and LEP students to participate in new forms of assessment. Some thought that parents would consider it unrealistic to expect these students to perform at the level of general education students. Others, however, thought that parents would believe it encourages the provision of quality education — that it would encourage mainstreaming, and support their child being treated more "as an equal." The majority of the districts thought that parent reaction would be positive toward their child participating in the Profile's performance packages. Many respondents stressed that the experience will be positive only if modifications are made in the packages to address individual student needs.

In general, the respondents stated that the Profile of Learning and its performance packages would have a positive impact on the curriculum being offered to students with disabilities and LEP students by promoting inclusion, broadening the curriculum, and increasing opportunities for interactive learning. Many respondents thought the standards reflected in the Profile would gear the curriculum toward completing the tasks in the performance packages. Several respondents thought that the curriculum offered to students with disabilities and LEP students should begin to include more patterning, problem solving, and measurement, which in turn, would lead to higher levels of academic rigor, higher expectations, and improved student achievement.

Summary

The Profile of Learning, with its higher standards and new forms of performance-based assessment, represents a dramatic departure from Minnesota's traditional approach to public education. Its underlying mission to transform the instructional and curricular direction of Minnesota schools is one that should be supported by all educational stakeholders. Several questions remain, however, as to how students with disabilities and LEP students can best be introduced to this new way of teaching and learning.

The many issues illuminated by this survey and the pilot district focus groups await resolution. Policies, guidelines, and practical examples are clearly needed to assist local decision making in the areas of participation, accommodations and modifications, and scoring and recording the performance levels of students with unique learning needs. However, the many benefits that students with disabilities and LEP students could enjoy through participation in the Profile of Learning will likely motivate parents, teachers, administrators, and students to continue to seek the answers they need.

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